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ABSTRACT

This study reviewed, over 2 years, all newspaper articles related to persons with disabilities in two major city newspapers with circulations of more than 500,000 (the Houston Post and the Los Angeles Times). The newspapers were reviewed to uncover trends and themes in the articles which reflected subtleties of views toward persons with disabilities. Content analysis of the 227 articles included both manifest content and latent content (the undertone or mood of the article). Results indicated that most articles revealed logical fallacies and did not portray persons with disabilities realistically but rather either as having superhuman characteristics or as deserving of pity. A few articles, however, portrayed persons with disabilities as competent members of society. People with disabilities and their advocates are urged to communicate their concerns to the media and to promote guidelines for the realistic portrayal of persons with disabilities in the media. A sample set of guidelines is attached. (Author/DB)

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Newspaper Images and Messages:

People with Disabilities

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Running Head: NEWSPAPER PORTRAYALS

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Abstract

This study reviewed all newspaper articles related to persons with disabilities over two years in two major city newspapers. The method consisted of examining two daily newspapers with large distribution areas to uncover trends and themes in the articles which reflected subtleties of views toward persons with disabilities. The content analysis of the articles included both manifest content and latent content analysis. Results indicated that persons with disabilities are not portrayed realistically and are more often portrayed as having superhuman characteristics or deserving of pity. A few articles, however, portrayed persons with disabilities as competent members of society.

Newspaper Images and Messages: People with Disabilities

Introduction

Societal attitudes about others, as well as ourselves, are shaped by experiences and are influenced strongly by portrayals in the media. Often in the guise of objective reporting, the media present value laden portrayals of persons with disabilities. Public policy and opinion are influenced, and often decided, by information presented in the media. In general, society's response to persons with disabilities is affected less by public policy and more by the prevailing societal attitude. Media portrayal, in particular, contributes to society's attitudinal response to persons with disabilities (Kriegel, 1987). Throughout history, society's attitude towards persons with disabilities has been predominantly negative. Rather than the portrayal of a person with a range of characteristics, individuals were represented as either heroic or pathetic cripples (Kriegel, 1987).

Only one published study was found which looked at media and persons with disabilities. In the examination of newspaper articles related to special education, three areas of issues - money, housing, and institutional treatment - dominated a sample of five large city newspapers. School related issues were least frequently mentioned (Yoshida, Wasilewski, & Friedman, 1990).

For much of society, print media is the source of beliefs and attitudes about persons with disabilities. With the current movement of many persons with disabilities into community living and employment, it is, therefore, important to examine media portrayal of persons with disabilities through print. In the past five years, there has been a concerted effort by advocacy organizations to condemn the prevalent negative images and messages perpetuated in the media and to educate the media on improving the images of persons with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to examine how persons with disabilities are portrayed in newspaper articles. Specifically, the questions asked were: (a) how are persons with disabilities

presented to the public and (b) what are the underlying attitudes or values toward persons with disabilities evident in the article descriptions?

Method

Two daily newspapers, both with large distribution areas and circulations of more than 500,000 were examined for the purpose of this study. Additional selection criteria included: (a) the availability of demographic information, (b) presence and availability of subject indices, (c) cultural diversity, and (d) location west of the Mississippi River. Cultural breakdown of the Los Angeles Times and The Houston Post can be found in Table 1.

Two investigators reviewed the index title listings for the years 1989 and 1990 (The Houston Post Index, 1989; The Houston Post Index, 1990; Los Angeles Times Index, 1989; Los Angeles Times Index, 1990) for possible relevance to persons with disabilities. A list of 35 subject titles was compiled and used as the sequence and guide to review the article descriptions in the newspaper index. To uncover trends and themes in the newspaper articles which might reflect the subtleties of views toward persons with disabilities, every article description under each subject title was read. If the article represented a person or group of persons with a physical disability or a mental disability, it was included in the study. The articles excluded reported on (a) a disability organization, (b) a medical research/treatment report, (c) self-help articles, (d) general information articles, (e) entertainment media reviews, (f) legislature, and (g) funding issues. For the purposes of this paper, articles about persons with mental illness were also excluded.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Analysis

Data collection consisted of a page by page search of all article descriptions related to persons with mental and physical disabilities. The article descriptions were copied on 3 x 5 inch note cards with their subject descriptor (eg., discrimination, blind, mental retardation). Content analysis of the articles included both manifest content and latent content. In manifest content, those elements that were physically present in the article were analyzed and coded. Manifest content analysis was the first level of analysis, that is, the obvious heading under which the article was found. For example, Special Olympics would have been coded as stated, the subject descriptor. Latent content analysis interpreted the undertone or mood of the article.

The procedure used was typological analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). In the first stage of manifest content analysis each article description was re-read and coded and then tallied for manifest content (e.g., blind, deaf, special education). Any article description found under more than one subject heading was coded under the one alphabetically first. For example, an article description under both "discrimination" and "handicapped" would be coded under "discrimination" to avoid possible duplication.

During the second stage of analysis, latent content coding, five categories emerged as shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Results

For this analysis 227 articles were included. Articles were excluded if they did not address a specific person or group of persons with disabilities. Consensus was 100% among investigators' categories of excluded articles.

Reliability

Reliability among the investigators for the latent categories was calculated by tallying each agreement and dividing that number by the total number of agreements and disagreements, then multiplying by 100 to get percentages. Reliability percentages can be found in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 About Here

When disagreement occurred, the article was categorized or eliminated based on consensus of the investigators. Additionally, twenty-three articles (10%) were randomly selected and read to verify that the article description in the indices reflected the actual latent content of the article. If a discrepancy occurred the article description was recoded by the investigators to reflect the tone of the actual article. This was necessary for only two article descriptions.

Reliability was done on 10% of the total article descriptors, 10% of the article descriptions used, and 10% of the actual articles. Latent content analysis resulted in 5 categories. Of the 227 articles included in the study, 22.2% of the articles reflected pity; 17.8% reflected "super human" feats; 16.9% of the articles de-valued persons with disabilities; 12.8% portrayed them as adversaries; and only the remaining 7.2% of the articles represented people with disabilities realistically, equally, fairly, and intelligently. Manifest content analysis of the same 227 articles revealed 35 subject titles. Findings were socially validated using a consensus of opinion by a group

naive to the purpose or questions of the study. This panel was comprised of educators, administrators, school psychologists, and special education teachers.

Ad Miscericordiam

Three prevalent themes emerged under the Ad Miscericordiam fallacy. They were (a) anger or outrage felt by society, because the person(s) with disabilities was portrayed as a poor, pathetic, helpless victim deserving sympathy, or (b) the person(s) with disabilities was portrayed as dependent upon society for his or her well being and care, or (c) the person(s) with disabilities was portrayed as a charity case. Examples of "hapless victims" included:

> ...removed a severely handicapped child from the home..., after 75 cats were removed the day before (The Houston Post (M) Ap. 28, 1990 - A 29:5)
>
> ...social services officials have lost track of a paraplegic homeless man ....(his) wheelchair had previously been stolen (Los Angeles Times (L) Mr 9, 1989 - II, 1:1).

The image of "society's dependent" was represented by:

> ...home for the mentally retarded ... closed by state officials previously for allegedly failing to provide proper care to clients ... (Los Angeles Times (L) Mr. 16, 1989 -II, 1:4).
>
> ...poor treatment of handicapped patients residing there and substandard living conditions (Los Angeles Times (M) F5, 1990 -B, 1:6).

Charity case examples such as the following were most prevalent and included:

> The organization of Share Happily and Reap Endlessly (SHARE) recently held their annual Western party to raise money for mentally retarded children (Los Angeles Times (M) My 22, 1989 -V, 3:1).

Ad Populum

Two prevalent themes emerged: (a) the person with disabilities portrayed as an expert because of his or her disabilities, and (b) person with disabilities portrayed

as having superhuman characteristics. Two examples found which portray the person with disabilities as an "expert" were:

> ...who has used a wheelchair since 1942 ... founded the Travel Industry and Disabled Exchange ... (Los Angeles Times (M) F 6, 1989 -IV, 5:2)
>
> ...Astrophysicist ... who has Lou Gehrig's disease, talks about his handicap (Los Angeles Times (L) Je 6, 1990 - E, 1:2)

Superhuman characteristics and feats were exemplified by:

> Special Olympics Gold Medalist M.... C.... who has Down's Syndrome (The Houston Post (M) Ap 16, 1989 -A, 10:1)
>
> ... a paraplegic park ranger ... is pulling himself up the face of 3,500 foot El Capitan ... (Los Angeles Times (M) Jl 26, 1989 - I, 3:2)

False Dilemma

Three prevalent themes emerged: (a) persons with disabilities portrayed as members of a surplus group separated from mainstream society, (b) certain alternatives were not offered; however, had modifications been made, the alternative would have been possible, and (c) persons with disabilities have their own set of rules; rules and laws are different because of the disability. Surplus group examples included:

> ...run a publicly funded business to house, treat, and train retarded people... (Los Angeles Times (L) Ja 10, 1989- I, 1:1)
>
> Easter bunnies hand sewn by handicapped prisoners at the Texas Department of Corrections prison farm were given to mentally retarded ... (The Houston Post (M) Mr 21, 1989 -A, 6:1)

Examples of the "lack of certain alternatives" were reflected in the following:

> ...the shortage of young workers in the labor force may cause employers to hire more handicapped workers. (Los Angeles Times (M) D 27, 1989 - D, 3:2)
>
> ... homeless couple had been turned away from several shelters because

B.... is in a wheelchair (Los Angeles Times (M) Je 25, 1989- II, 1:1)

Articles which implied a different set of laws or rules for persons with disabilities because of the disability were reflected in the following:

> ... approved a bill that would exempt all blind and deaf students from a competency examination ... (The Houston Post (M) Ap 20, 1989 - A, 14:1)
>
> The Supreme Court ruled that Texas cannot enact the death penalty against P.... P...., a mentally retarded person convicted of murder ... (The Houston Post (L) Je 27, 1989 -A, 1:1)

Ad Hominem

The prevalent themes under the fallacy Ad Hominem were (a) a person without disabilities represented the interests of the person with disabilities because people with disabilities cannot represent themselves; (b) persons with disabilities themselves were opponents to the system; and (c) government or another powerful group or persons was in an adversarial position toward people with disabilities. Examples of "others representing the interests of people with disabilities" because of inability to represent themselves included the following:

> A state lawmaker has called for the firing of three top officials at the TDMHMR because the "management has failed miserably" in responding to the rape and pregnancy of a mentally retarded woman at Lubbock State School... (The Houston Post (M) D 1, 1990 -A,27:1)
>
> A group of activists for disabled rights stages a demonstration in Greyhound's Los Angeles downtown terminal, disrupting busy Labor Day bus travel... (Los Angeles Times (M) S 5, 1989 - II, 1:4)

Additionally, the following articles represented self-advocacy as an opposition to the system:

> Crawling up to the Capitol steps to dramatize the barriers confronting them, scores of disables person rallied to protest delays in congressional action on

a Senate-passed bill... (Los Angeles Times (L) Mr 13, 1990 - A, 27:1)

... S.... F...., a quadriplegic ... sued Medi-Cal of California for the right to be allowed to receive care in his home instead of the hospital. (Los Angeles Times (M) S 6, 1990 - B, 2:5)

Government, or another powerful group or person, in an adversarial position toward persons with disabilities were reflected in the following:

On May 1, 1990 US District Judge K.... H.... ruled that Fort Bend Independent School District in Texas does not have to pay for a year of educating handicapped student M.... M..... at a residential treatment center, although her family claims she did not receive an adequate education at school. (Los Angeles Times (S) My 2, 1990 - A, 21:5)

...reasons S.... C.... confined to a wheelchair, (not allowed to board cruise ship because) it would ruin the good time of the other passengers with someone in a wheelchair aboard. (The Houston Post (M) Ap 27, 1990 -A, 25:1)

Normalization

Two prevalent themes emerged: (a) people with disabilities are represented in the mainstreamed society, and are undifferentiated because of their disabilities, and (b) people with disabilities are included and participate fully because of assistive devices. Reasonable accommodations were made in order for them to function in society. Persons with disabilities were portrayed as "socially competent members" in the following:

Red Lobster restaurants in Houston frequently hire handicapped persons ... (The Houston Post (M) Ja 7, 1990 - D, 1:2)

"Socially competent" members with assistance were exemplified by:

A special rally pairing blind navigators with sighted drivers ... (Los Angeles Times (L) Jl 12, 1990 - C, 6:1)

Los Angeles county will provide a sign language interpreter for juror ... (Los Angeles Times (M) My 2, 1989 - II 3:4)

Discussion

This study found that most newspaper articles about persons with disabilities revealed "logical fallacies", often referred to as informal fallacies. Logical fallacies refer to mistakes in reasoning, that is, the use of faulty reasoning. Yet, the reader may ask, what is so dangerous about mistakes in reasoning; it is not as if mistakes in reasoning are moral violations? In truth, mistakes in reasoning have traditionally been connected by philosophers with lapses in moral character or with lack of virtue (Howard, 1990).

Although the use fallacious reasoning is not intentional, its use is a deception because the truth remains hidden, or worse, it becomes either exaggerated or undermined. The logical fallacies discovered in the articles are presented not with the intention of blaming anyone for intentionally deceiving the public with regard to people with disabilities. Rather, they are made apparent because the use of fallacious reasoning is always a deception.

Many professionals have assumed that with increased mainstreaming, de-institutionalization, community integration, and supported employment opportunities, media attention, which reflects public attitude, would present a more favorable picture for persons with disabilities. However, these results reveal that persons with disabilities rarely are represented on a realistic level as persons with a range of characteristics. Rather, they are most often discussed through the media as having super or heroic powers or deserving of pity. Media writes inspirational "stories", in the belief that they are advocating for people with disabilities , when in fact they place unrealistic expectations on many of them.

For society's attitude to change, people with disabilities must be portrayed realistically. Writers are justified in appealing to the pity of their readers when the

need to inspire this emotion is closely related to whatever they are arguing for and when the argument does not rest on this appeal alone. When the appeal to pity stands alone, even in charitable appeals where its use is fundamental, its use is questionable (Miller, 1992), as the appeal is merely to pity and thus stereotype people with disabilities. Justice Newman has reflected that society and its accumulation of "myths and fears about disability and disease are as handicapping as are the physical limitations that flow from actual impairment." ("On Cases of Cartagian," 1987, p. A21).

From this examination of two daily newspapers with a circulation of over one million readers, it is obvious that media portrayals may impact society's view of persons with disabilities. Some groups have published guidelines to help writers avoid demeaning and sensationalistic messages (e.g., National Easter Seal Society, 1981; The Disability Rag, January/February, 1992; Johnson, 1990; American Psychological Association, 1990). A summary of suggestions is included in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 About Here

For people with disabilities to be included and integrated into society, their portrayals must be realistic and accurate. Achieving that accuracy cannot happen without readers' proactive as well as reactive involvement. Feedback to the industry that provides these portrayals is vital and long overdue. Persons with disabilities and their advocates must promote guidelines for the realistic portrayal of persons with disabilities in the media. By communicating concerns to newspaper representatives and regulatory agencies, the elimination of negative portrayals that serve to maintain society's prejudices and fears would be possible.

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Table 1

Census Demographics

Census Demographics		
	Los Angeles*	Houston**
American Indian	16,595 (0.6%)	8,044 (0.2%)
Asian	not reported	110,848 (3.2%)
Asian Pacific Islander	196,017 (6.6%)	not reported
African American/Black	505,210 (17.0%)	541,180 (15.6%)
Hispanic	not reported	644,935 (18.6%)
White	1,816,761 (61.2%)	1,824,137 (52.7%)
Other Nationality	432,267 (14.6%)	333,990 (9.6%)

*Source: Los Angeles Times

**Source: 1990 U. S. Census

Table 2
Newspaper Portrayal Categories

Ad Miscericordiam. Articles conveyed an undertone of pathos or pity for the persons with disabilities. They contributed to a picture of the person with disabilities being "forever a child" or totally depending on the good will of society. The logical fallacy which applied here was Ad Miscericordiam - stereotyping of pitiness.

Ad Populum. Articles conveyed an undertone of "super humanness". People with disabilities were viewed as having super human characteristics which allowed them to succeed where even those with no disabilities would not usually have found success.

False Dilemma. Articles conveyed an undertone of de-valuation or denial of basic rights of the person(s) with disabilities. They were viewed as a generally unwanted, a less than desirable segment of society; a surplus group who needs their own place somewhere else, thereby implying segregation. The logical fallacy was the False Dilemma, that is, proposing a choice between two alternatives, while neither may be the best possibility, suggesting or implying that another possibility does not exist.

Ad Hominem. The person or group discussed were opponents to the "system" or someone was advocating for their interests by challenging the system. The logical fallacy was Ad Hominem - against the person. The underlying suggestion was that people with disabilities were adversarial.

Normalization. Articles which represented normalization as the "utilization of means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible" (Wolfensberger, p. 306, cited in Blatt, Biklen & Bogden, 1977). Persons with disabilities were presented as having the same goals, dreams, and wishes as anyone else. Included were articles about accommodations or technical or assistive devices that assist the people with disabilities to function in society. People with disabilities were portrayed as real people with the same rights as everyone else in society - that is, the argument was to permit them to function in society, as if they did not have disabilities.

Table 3

Interobserver Agreement

Underlying theme	Reliability
Ad Miscericordiam	96.9%
Ad Populum	100%
False Dilemma	96.2%
Ad Hominem	100%
Normalization	83.3%

Table 4

Guidelines for Writers

1. Avoid all terms that carry negative or judgmental connotations and replace them with objective descriptors (e.g., rather than "invalid", which literally means "not valid", use the term, "the person who has a disability resulting from or caused by").
2. Do not allow personal issues to become the topic of the interview. The interview should be about an issue, not personal courage, dilemmas or trials related to the disability.
3. Use "value-neutral" terms, that is, the writer's admiration - or pity - is not to be included in the story.
4. Avoid the use of slang terms (e.g., para, crip, gimp) even if the person with disabilities who is being interviewed uses the terms.
5. Avoid improper constructions such as "disabled parking"; instead build phrases using the word "disability" (parking for persons with disabilities).
6. Avoid terms beginning with "the " followed by an adjective, such as, "the blind".
7. Most effective and important is to ask if any description is needed at all. For example, if a writer feels he or she is using "person with disability" too often, they should decide whether or not those words are even relevant to the story.